

Creating a Digital Portfolio

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Gail Koch

Thesis advisor

Pamela Farnen

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pamela Farnen". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana

May 2004

May 8, 2004

Thesis
124
2004
KGB

ABSTRACT

In the professional world of journalism, nothing is more important to your career than selling yourself to editors and putting forward a good product for them to judge you by. Good stories, good graphics, good design — your work experience is what will get you in the door in this profession and help you to establish your career. Often times, editors receive work samples from prospective employees in the form of sloppy newspaper clippings that have been hastily thrown together in an envelope. When that envelope arrives on their desk, editors are forced to plow through a pile of papers that leaves them with ink stains on their hands. But when editors receive a portfolio that has been submitted electronically, that's when they know the person has taken the next step, gone the extra mile and is serious about wanting to work for them.

Taking this into consideration, I set out this semester to create a digital portfolio in a CD format that I could use in the future when applying for prospective jobs. The main components of this project will include the CD that will contain my digital portfolio (which is comprised of some of my best writing and graphics work I have completed during my college career) in addition to an analysis of how I completed the project, why I chosen the design style I did and what I learned in the process of creating it.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank the following people for their help in creating this thesis:

- Pam Farnen: As my thesis advisor, Pam was extremely helpful in critiquing both the design of my portfolio and its contents. She was a strong emphasis in creating a body of work that would boast a clean, simple design and I have her to thank for that.
- Allen Sundstrom: As a staff member of the journalism department's Digital Portfolio Center, Alan was on hand when ever I needed him to answer any questions I had about Flash (the program I used to create my digital portfolio). Without his help, I'm not sure I could have ever gotten this done!
- Jennifer George-Palilonis: Jen was a big help in selecting fonts to use for the digital portfolio and also offered her advice on the overall look of the portfolio.

AUTHOR'S ANALYSIS

My honors thesis project is a digital portfolio I created of my work as a journalist that I can use in the future when applying for jobs at newspapers.

While working on the portfolio over the course of the past few months, I would have to say the learning process that I used for this project was certainly one of trial and error! Prior to beginning the major computer work for the project, I had a definite pre-conceived notion in my head of the message I wanted to convey with my portfolio: tight design, crisp writing and lots of white space. All of which would come together to create what looked like an effortless, simple body of work.

Much of how I came up with the look of the product was through my own creative means. I did not reference any one particular magazine for a style or look, but would have to say my choice of serif font and design was a culmination of what I learned throughout my four years as a design student in the journalism department with the idea being that the more simple the product is, the better it will be.

The next step in the project was selecting which of my pieces of work I would include in the portfolio itself. This was a somewhat challenging task, seeing as how I have written hundreds of pieces that have been published in the *Daily News* (the student newspaper), *expo* (the student magazine) and professional newspapers including the *Muncie Star Press*, *Marion Chronicle-Tribune* and *Cincinnati Enquirer*. I wanted to put together what I considered to be my best work, but I also wanted to show a variety of writing (hard news, feature, enterprise, columns) that illustrated my ability to write on numerous topics and my diversity as a journalist.

I feel as though the pieces I selected for the portfolio certainly include some of my best, including two enterprise packages I wrote as an intern for the *Chronicle-Tribune* (one of which was honored in a nationwide contest for its content and theme) and a profile I wrote for the *Daily News* as a sophomore about David Letterman on the eve of his 20th anniversary as a popular late-night talk show host. Looking back on what I selected, I wish now that I had perhaps made some different selections of choices, but all of those articles I included were ones I felt had an impact on me as a journalist. In particular, a series of stories I included about the development of a skate park for the youth in Fairmount may not seem that significant of work, but those pieces taught me that a lot can come out of covering what is often

considered a “dreaded city council meeting” and I also was awed by the amount of work those kids underwent to realize their dream.

When it came time for me to select the graphics I would include in the portfolio, I had an easier time making that decision. All of the pieces I included were professional clips that were published while I was an intern in the summer of 2003 for the *Enquirer*. The piece on Sawyer Point and the skating competition was a significant addition because it was one of the larger graphics I did for the newspaper and also happened to be the very first project they gave to me to do on the job! Another on the Mars opposition was one I was particularly proud of completing as the summer drew to a close. This was an accomplishment for me because I brainstormed and pitched the graphic as an idea of my own. It ran with a front-page feature story I also wrote (included in the portfolio), a package which won a newsroom-wide contest for its design and content.

Lastly, and I say this with great pride, my best graphic in my portfolio would be the piece on the 100th anniversary of flight in honor of the Wright brothers’ invention of the airplane. The graphic (which covered two pages of the newspaper) ran in the center section of a special addition to the newspaper and won several awards as well. I felt incredibly honored to have been selected to come up with the design of the graphic, research and write its content, and — with the help of my mentor — create the finished product using computer programs such as Freehand and Photoshop.

Other components of the portfolio that I included were links to my experience in the teaching field (I felt as though this window could serve me in the future as I’d like to be a journalism teacher and know I will have work to document in this field as well) and a link to my resume for employers who wish to contact me or my references.

Once I selected what would go into my portfolio and had a clear concept of what the look of it would be, it was time to start creating it. This was perhaps where I had the most significant learning experience. I consider myself quick with learning computer design programs, but Flash is a difficult program to use (for those unfamiliar with the program, it is what many Web designers use to create Web sites that feature animation: think those jumping cartoons that will occasionally pop up on your computer screen!). Because of the degree of difficulty and the limited number of people in the department who knew the program and could help me, understanding how to use Flash was an incredible accomplishment for me. It was also a great outcome of creating this digital portfolio and was a personal goal of mine.

I spent many nights holed up in a computer lab for several hours at a time, tweaking my design, writing the captions that would accompany my clips and programming the information so that everything linked properly.

I also had to design a navigation style for my portfolio that was easy enough for anyone to use. I linked all of my components (writing, graphics, teaching, resume) to what I referred to as a home page. From the home page, you could click on any one of those components and it would bring up a new page that would take you into each body of work and let you click through the different pieces at your leisure. Creating this usability portion of the portfolio also proved to be somewhat tricky!

Another important thing I learned as I drew near to finishing the portfolio was to *always* save your work — and then back up to a server, a second disk or the hard drive. This was a lesson that came to me when the Zip disk I had been using to save my work on was destroyed by a portable hard drive connected to one of the lab computers. As devastating as losing a quarter of my portfolio was (I had backed up much of the rest), the experience of redoing what I had lost was one that taught me a lesson in optimism and completing the work the second time around only went that much more smoothly!

The final step of the process — compiling everything into one final portfolio that could be burnt to a CD and considered for publication on the Internet if I wanted to do so in the future — was the most nerve-wracking. This is where I had to learn some of the Internet language (known as JavaScripting in this case) and to apply what several of my peers had taught me when using Flash.

The result of my many hours of work is a portfolio that was completed by me, for me and is about me. I'd like to think that when my portfolio slides across the desk of a potential employer, they will ask the question of "What's this?" before popping that CD into their computer. Perhaps they will then nod their head at the cleverness I've demonstrated in creating an electronic copy of my work — one without frayed edges, smudged ink or missing corners. And maybe — just maybe — they will remember me from that stack of applications. And think of me first when it comes time to make the hire.